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Graphic Novels in the Secondary Classroom and School Libraries

Graphic novels can provide teaching and learning opportunities for readers, educators, and researchers. In this article, discover which graphic novels to use and how to use them in your classroom.

Paula E. Griffith

On the last day of the fall book fair, a shy girl I recognized as one of our students with book-hungry eyes came to the circulation desk and said, “My teacher sent me here to get a book.” Her voice grew soft. “But I don’t have any money.” She looked at me with a puzzled expression. I explained that her teachers chose her to receive a free book from the book fair and that she did not need money. I watched as understanding washed over her features and, skipping slightly, she went straight to the table with the graphic novels.

She critically examined only the graphic novels, and I did not say a word, even though I stood by just in case she needed any help. She selected her book with confidence and strolled to the circulation desk, where I recorded the title and price on the sales sheet. She grasped the book in her arms folded across her chest and skipped out of the library and up the stairs, beaming about her new possession.

I thought about her selection and how she considered no other kind of book. Checking that fall book fair sales sheet, I was surprised to see how many graphic novels we sold—twice the number from last spring. I noted that this was a new trend I needed to track for collection development. Because I was never a comic book reader, the appeal of graphic novels puzzled me. As the year progressed to its end, I read several graphic novels. I noticed that not all graphic novels were equal, nor did they appeal to all sixth graders; however, those who read graphic novels were avid fans who selected these books above all others.

I tried to remain objective about this new format and learned that graphic novels incorporated all genres. My English training really rebelled in labeling any kind of novel as nonfiction. I realized that graphic novels were more complex than I first thought. Most important, I had to learn how to select age-appropriate graphic novels that would appeal to my sixth graders while reflecting some kind of “quality.” The biggest problem I could see at that time was identifying criteria for age appropriateness and quality for a genre that was new to me.

There is an additional need to understand how graphic novels relate to child development and age appropriateness.

Graphic Novels and Pop Culture

During the summer, I moved from my sixth-grade school library to a university position teaching library science classes in a school library education program. One of my responsibilities was teaching a young adult literature course. I realized that I would have to become more than just familiar with graphic works in print and media, because this was a cultural trend in

the young adult literature field of study. The increased interest in graphic novels on my small-town, sixth-grade campus was not my imagination.

In 2006, Allen (2006) reported that, according to *Publishers Weekly*, graphic novel sales in the United States and Canada increased by 18% and represented \$245 million in total book sales. Also in 2006, book and comics publishers gathered in New York City for a national comic convention, the ICv2 Graphic Novel Conference, a first-time event planned as an opening to the New York Comic Con, a full-service popular culture conference showcasing video games, movies, toys, and print publications such as comics and graphic novels.

In 2007, graphic novel sales in the United States and Canada increased 12% (MacDonald, 2008), and in 2008, graphic novel sales increased 5% during a year of economic downturn (Reid, 2009). Graphic novels have also become the focal point for other consumer items such as movies, toys, and video games. From 1968 to 2000, 35 movies were created from comics or graphic novels (Nash Information Services, 1997–2009); however, from 2001 through March 2009, 61 movies based on comic books or graphic novels opened in U.S. theaters, a dramatic increase.

Graphic novel characters such as those found in the *Danger Girl* series were also re-created into action figures or video game characters. As the popularity of graphic novels increased, they integrated with popular culture for children and adolescents via marketing and mass production. School librarians and teachers became aware of the need for criteria to evaluate graphic novels for school libraries and classrooms. There is an

additional need to understand how graphic novels relate to child development and age appropriateness as well as understanding what research has revealed about graphic novels.

Are Graphic Novels Real Literature?

Some teachers and librarians do not consider graphic novels to be literature. As a secondary English teacher with a background in literature, I did not consider them for classroom use until I noticed their popularity among students; however, popularity alone is not enough for inclusion in the classroom.

In 1992, the Pulitzer Prize Committee recognized Art Spiegelman's *Maus* for Special Awards and Citation–Letters. In 2007, the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) awarded Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* the Michael L. Printz Award. In 2009, YALSA created the “Great Graphic Novels for Teens” list as an aid for teachers, librarians, parents, and teenagers. In 2007, the Association for Library Service to Children awarded Siena Cherson Siegel's *To Dance: A Ballerina's Graphic Novel* the Robert F. Sibert Medal for nonfiction. Graphic novels have recently won several prestigious literary awards, which means that these books are considered literature for children, teenagers, and adults.

What is a graphic novel? Baird and Jackson (2007) have argued that “a successful graphic novel starts with a stellar story told with words and pictures that augment the story, providing insight that text alone cannot do” (p. 5). Krashen (2005) referred to graphic novels as “new media” (p. 1), whereas Mooney (2002) argued that graphic novels are different from comic books because graphic novels are longer stories and many are able to stand alone, unlike serial comics. Gallo and Weiner (2004) argued the following:

A well-done graphic novel offers the immediacy of the prose reading experience, with the pictures and the words working simultaneously, making a graphic novel not only something one reads but something one sees as well, like reading and watching a movie at the same time. (p. 115)

There are key concepts in these attempts to define a new media that will facilitate our quest for evaluation criteria: interdependent “words and pictures,”

“a stellar story” (Baird & Jackson, 2007), and “media” (Krashen, 2005). There is also the element Gallo and Weiner (2004) described as interacting with two forms of media at once, print and image.

Media is a means of communication, including print formats such as newspapers, magazines, and books; audio formats such as radio; and visual formats such as television and film. Graphic novels include elements of both print and visual in the creations of characters that move through the narrative within sequential art panels that show the action and characterization and help establish tone and mood. McPherson (2006) identified format and illustration as important elements of graphic novels, and Christensen (2006) argued that content is critical in a graphic novel, especially those selected for classroom instruction.

Graphic Novel Evaluation Criteria

Format is critical for any book, but most especially in graphic novels. Format includes exterior and interior elements such as font and font size, word placement and appearance, and arrangement of the art frames on the page. Format enables readers to effortlessly follow the story or hinders readers in their attempt to comprehend. Some criteria for format evaluation are as follows:

- Does the graphic novel have an interesting cover that correctly depicts the content?
- Are the illustrations arranged in a way that readers can easily follow the sequence?
- Do the gutters (i.e., the spaces between the illustrations) aid comprehension or distract the reader?
- Is the text clearly readable with an appropriate font and font size?
- Does the white space between the text, frames, and illustrations help readers move through the book, or are the pages too busy?
- Is there a glossary to assist with vocabulary in nonfiction graphic novels?
- Is there a table of contents or index to help readers locate information in nonfiction graphic novels?

The artistic rendering of the story contributes to half the ability to comprehend it fully; therefore, the illustrations are equally as important as the text. The illustrations add the information and detail missing from the text. Although the clues may be evident or subtle, the illustrations enable the reader to make inferences and judgments separate from the reading and understanding of words.

It is the illustrations that create the effect of watching a movie. Similar to that experience, the reader becomes part of the story through the illustrations and the words. It is also the illustrations that set the tone or mood of the story or nonfiction information. Although personal tastes in art may vary greatly from one person to another, the rule for graphic novels is that the illustrative art must be true to the content. Criteria for evaluating graphic novel illustrations include the following:

- Does the color palette (e.g., pastels, primary colors, sepia tones) aid the reader in understanding the tone and mood of the story?
- Do the illustrations refine characterization by giving clues as to character emotion, mood, and personality?
- Does the style of art (e.g., abstract, impressionist, surrealist) fit the type of story or information in the novel or seem disjointed and out of place?
- Has both positive space (i.e., the objects in the illustrations) and negative space (i.e., the space between the objects) been used to create a visually pleasing effect?
- Do the illustrations provide enough context and action to keep the reader moving through the story?

The final consideration is the fiction or nonfiction content of the graphic novel. Format is much like the bread on a sandwich and the illustrations like the toppings, and the content is like the meat of any graphic novel. For this category of criteria, evaluation of a graphic novel becomes much like evaluating any other book for the library or classroom. These criteria are familiar, but they are listed here to emphasize that

good graphic novels contain all the literary elements we expect for quality fiction and nonfiction books.

For fiction graphic novels, evaluation criteria should include the following:

- Does the graphic novel have three-dimensional characters with characteristics similar to your readers?
- Does the graphic novel have themes relevant and important to your readers?
- Is the conflict relevant and appropriate for your readers?
- Are there age-appropriate moral, ethical, or political themes that resonate through the story?
- Does the action keep your readers' interest and motivate them to continue reading?
- Is the climax realistic and true to the rising action?
- Is the denouement satisfying as a culmination of narrative events?
- Does the resolution bring the conflict to a satisfying end?

Nonfiction graphic novels have different evaluation criteria, some of which are as follows:

- Does the content have a clear organization that aids reading comprehension?
- Is the information interesting enough to keep readers actively engaged with the text?
- Are there appealing charts, graphs, and other visual aids to help the reader understand the concepts?
- Are there enough supporting details to explain or describe each main idea? If the information is sequential, such as a how-to, are there enough steps so that the reader can replicate the process?
- Is the content relevant and age-appropriate for the developmental level of your readers?

Graphic Novels, Adolescents, and Readability

Age appropriateness is a concern when selecting any materials for the classroom and library. When there is a question of age appropriateness, a wise teacher or

librarian will consult the professional review sources such as the *School Library Journal* or *The Horn Book* for recommendations. These professional reviews can be accessed using many of the book vendor tools, such as Follett Library Resources's Titlewave or *What Kids Are Reading: The Book Reading Habits of Students in American Schools* report (Renaissance Learning, 2009).

Adolescents usually like reading about protagonists two years older than their own age (Nilsen & Donelson, 2009). It is important to look at the themes in graphic novels and ask if the themes fit with your students' development level. Conflicts are also important. Will your students be familiar with the conflict in the graphic novel you are considering, and will it be interesting to them? As with selecting any reading material, the maturational development of your students should be a key concern for graphic novel selection.

Some educators choose to look at readability levels for graphic novels using tools such as Accelerated Reader's ATOS or Lexile measures. Readability formulas are based on an analysis of words within sentences or paragraphs. These numerical formulas do not assess illustrations and the effect they have on comprehension. Because word and illustration are fused for meaning in a graphic novel, readability formulas can mislead educators who are trying to match books to a student's reading ability.

For Peter Sis's *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain*, the ATOS readability level is 5.2, or fifth grade second month, whereas the Lexile measurement is listed as 760, or third grade. I am not sure that either readability level takes into account the political and moral issues Sis describes in his autobiographical graphic novel, which shows what it was like to grow up in an intellectual prison and depicts his symbolic use of color, especially red.

Although readability may be an issue for selection of fiction or nonfiction, children and adolescents will select the graphic novels that appeal to them in content as well as readability. The graphic novel format also enables some students to read materials that were previously too difficult in length or in use of language.

The Puffin Graphics from Penguin Group USA are re-creations of classics such as *The Wizard of Oz*,

Macbeth, and *Dracula* that stay true to the original works but include beautiful illustrations that aid reading comprehension. One of the reasons graphic novels are so appealing to many readers is the wide variety of appealing content: classic literature, manga, science fiction, historical fiction, problem novels, and every other genre existing in literature.

What Does Research Reveal About Graphic Novels?

Although research has only just begun regarding this new graphic format, there are some very interesting results that we, as educators, should note. Stall (2000) found that comics can aid in vocabulary development for elementary students with language and learning disabilities. Schneider (2005) discovered that high school students who were identified as having learning disabilities self-reported that graphic novels motivated them to read and aided their comprehension. Crawford (2004) argued that graphic novels can benefit English learners (ELs), and MacDonell (2004) found that pleasure reading is critical for ELs, and many select graphic novels for pleasure reading.

More recently, Poerschke (2005) found that although graphic novels were the least selected category of reading materials, students requested more manga texts for their library. Female students reported reading more in other categories, but more male students reported reading graphic novels. Monnin (2008) discovered that a teacher and a student read the images on different levels and that graphic novels provided new opportunities for developing in-school literacies. Hammond (2009) found that high school seniors responded to graphic novels in many of the traditional ways, such as critical analysis, but they adjusted their normal reading process to include image analysis.

New literacy terms have emerged as a result of closer scrutiny of graphic novels. Messaris (1994) and Buckingham (2003) both delineated *image literacy* as a complex understanding of image within a context. Alvermann and Hagood (2000) connected graphic novel reading to *media literacy*, related to Internet and new technology literacies. Norton (2003) identified *semiotic modes*, connecting graphic novels to the study of signs and symbols. Schwartz and Rubinstein-Avila (2006) identified *new literacy studies* as the

opportunity to examine and understand the kinds of literacies created by new technologies and graphics. McPherson (2006) referred to *multiple modalities* as the process of comprehending a fused text/illustration format. Kress (2008) morphed *multiple modalities* into *multimodality*, and *multimodal reading* as a comprehension process becomes a type of reading and thinking.

There is much need for further research using graphic novels. We need to know if graphic novels can provide a transition into more difficult reading materials for struggling readers at all levels. We need to know more about how this format assists ELs in acquiring English literacy skills. We need to understand more about how multiple modalities work and how they are related to adolescent comprehension.

The field of digital literacies is revealing a whole new world of literacy that needs further exploration. One such project is the MIT-supported Project New Media Literacies (newmedialiteracies.org; 2008), which is currently researching what kinds of skills students need for social networking for information on the Internet. Their mission is for students “to become full participants in an emergent media landscape and raise public understanding about what it means to be literate in a globally interconnected, multicultural world” (para. 1).

Graphic novels provide new learning opportunities for adolescents in both middle school and high school. Many adolescents are already aware of this format, even though the reading of these books requires different skills than novels with prose only. My graduate students, many of whom are left-brained, linear readers, complain when they are required to read a graphic novel. Adult readers who are not used to reading a graphic format have some difficulty with sequencing, which is why these books may not be for all readers but instead for those students who know and prefer this format.

Although I may not recommend a class study of a graphic novel, teachers can use parts of graphic novels that merge and connect with their instructional units or offer a choice for a graphic novel book club.

We need to understand more about how multiple modalities work and how they are related to adolescent comprehension.

Graphic novels are also good for book talks and reading motivation. If you agree that you want your students reading, short book talks about popular teen literature can alert students to titles that interest them and motivate students to read in their leisure time, which is often divided by extracurricular activities, watching television, spending time with peers, and checking the Internet.

Graphic novels for middle school readers should include both fiction and nonfiction and engage the readers as active reading participants (see Table 1). Jason Lutes's *Houdini: The Handcuff King* is a graphic biography that allows readers to not only understand Harry Houdini but also the world he lived in and those people closest to him. This book could be included in a study of famous people and would motivate the reader for further research.

For those advanced readers who like graphic novels, Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* is a clever graphic philosophical story in which the reader becomes an immigrant to a strange, new land. This graphic novel would be a wonderful connection to the discussion of immigrants and their experiences.

For those readers of realistic fiction, Kevin Pyle's *Blindspot* is the story of a boy so wrapped up in playing war games that he neglects his schoolwork until he encounters a homeless war veteran who invades the boy's battleground and changes his perspective of war. This novel would be a welcome addition for units focusing on war and conflict as well as the study of characterization through image and text.

For those fantasy lovers and fans of Brian Jacques's Redwall series, David Petersen's Mouse Guard series provides a search for truth and a stunning betrayal as the Mouse Guard protects the Mouse Territories from hungry snakes and treachery. The Mouse Guard series would aid any teacher who wishes to focus on the elements of fantasy, story, tone, and mood with both text and image.

Finally, for those readers who love humor, Nathaniel Marunas's *Manga Claus: The Blade of Kringle* recounts the story of an unhappy elf who enchants a ninja nutcracker that zaps the teddy bears with its evil powers and turns the workshop into chaos as the clock ticks off the seconds until Christmas. Besides being a humorous holiday read, *Manga Claus* is a

manga parody and would fit into a study of the manga format and other Japanese cultural studies.

High school selections (see Table 2) could include George O'Connor's *Journey Into Mohawk Country: The Journal of Harmen Meynderts van den Bogaert*, a secondary English teacher's dream because the entire story was written using primary documents and is translated from Dutch. This graphic nonfiction selection would be an excellent model for primary document research and creating a graphic novel based on research findings.

Further nonfiction study of famous people might include Andrew Helfer's *Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography*, based on the autobiography Malcolm X wrote with Alex Haley. This graphic novel situates Malcolm X's life within the context of the Civil Rights movement, would fit into the study of black history, the Civil Rights movement, and autobiographies, or biographies, and is sure to motivate readers for further research.

For those students who are interested in realistic fiction with punch, Mike Carey's *Re-Gifters* looks at the friendship between a Korean American teen, Dixie, and her friend, Avril. Dixie learns a difficult lesson and discovers the meaning of true friendship. Cecil Castellucci's *The Plain Janes* is a story of misfits who, despite their good intentions, manage to gain the attention of the suburban police while they earn a reputation as outlaws. Gipi's *Garage Band* is the story of four very different friends who come together to form a band. When they get a chance to sign with a record label, a blown amp catapults them into an unexpected brush with crime. All three of these books would help students understand cause and effect and have well-developed stories with some surprises. *Re-Gifters* and *The Plain Janes* would appeal more to girls, whereas *Garage Band* would appeal to both girls and boys.

Graphic novels can provide a myriad of teaching and learning opportunities for readers, educators, and researchers. As an increasingly popular format, readers will continue to select those books they want to read in their leisure time, and many of these titles will be graphic novels. Educators are observing this format as a possibility for reading motivation and learning,

Table 1 Graphic Novels for the Middle School Classroom and School Library

Author	Title	Summary	Curriculum connection
Abadzis, Nick	<i>Laika</i>	Laika, a Russian dog pioneer, is selected to man Sputnik II.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Social studies: Cold War ■ Language arts: Research opportunities, nonfiction
Almond, David	<i>The Savage</i>	When he loses his father, Blue begins to write about a savage kid who punishes bullies and has difficulty connecting to people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Language arts: Characterization, story elements, story structure
Cavallaro, Michael	<i>L. Frank Baum's The Wizard of Oz: The Graphic Novel</i>	True to the original, Dorothy embarks on a journey to find her way home.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Language arts: Classics, theme, tone
Cover, Arthur Byron	<i>William Shakespeare's Macbeth: The Graphic Novel</i>	This science fiction version of <i>Macbeth</i> includes dragons and space armor.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Language arts: Classics, compare/contrast to the original story
Lee, Tony	<i>Outlaw: The Legend of Robin Hood</i>	This graphic novel tells the story of Robin Hood from childhood through adulthood.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Social studies: Crusades, British history ■ Language arts: Legends, research opportunities
Lutes, Jason	<i>Houdini: The Handcuff King</i>	This Harry Houdini biography reveals some of the secrets of his tricks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Language arts: Biography
Marunas, Nathaniel	<i>Manga Claus: The Blade of Kringle</i>	Santa is forced to "go ninja" to save Christmas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Language arts: Manga
Moore, Stuart	<i>Redwall: The Graphic Novel</i>	The graphic rendering of Brian Jacques's <i>Redwall</i> book is about a brave mouse that discovers the sword of Martin the Warrior and defends Redwall against its enemies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Language arts: Fantasy
Petersen, David	<i>Mouse Guard: Fall 1152; and Mouse Guard: Winter 1152</i>	This is a fantasy story of a group of mice who conduct themselves like Knights of the Round Table.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Language arts: Fantasy, legend
Pyle, Kevin C.	<i>Blindspot</i>	Dean learns that war takes on a much darker meaning than the games he plays with friends when he encounters a homeless veteran.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Language arts: Literary elements, cause/effect
Reed, Gary	<i>Bram Stoker's Dracula: The Graphic Novel</i>	This is the graphic adaptation of the story of an evil Transylvanian nobleman.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Language arts: Classics
Sís, Peter	<i>The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain</i>	Sís describes with illustration what it was like to grow up in an intellectual prison.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Social studies: Cold War, communism ■ Language arts: Symbolism
Sturm, James	<i>Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow</i>	In this telling of Paige's amazing story, the reader gets a feel for what life was like under the Jim Crow laws.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Social studies: Civil Rights movement ■ Language arts: Research opportunities, characterization, setting
Tan, Shaun	<i>The Arrival</i>	An immigrant leaves his family and culture to face the unknown and takes the reader with him.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Social studies: Immigration ■ Language arts: Inferences

Table 2 Graphic Novels for the High School Classroom and School Library

Author	Title	Summary	Curriculum connection
Carey, Mike	<i>Re-Gifters</i>	Jen Dik Seong, a.k.a. "Dixie," has to get in touch with her cultural values when she falls for a fellow hapkido martial arts contestant who proves to be unworthy of her attentions.	■ Language arts: Theme, culture
Castellucci, Cecil	<i>The Plain Janes</i>	Jane's parents decide the city is too dangerous, so they move her to the suburbs. Trying to find her niche, Jane makes friends who form a group bent on committing random acts of art.	■ Language arts: Characterization, story elements, cause/effect
Gipi	<i>Garage Band</i>	Four troubled boys find more trouble than they can handle when trying to make a recording of their band and blowing an amp.	■ Language arts: International literature, characterization
Helfer, Andrew	<i>Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography</i>	This biography is based largely on the autobiography Malcolm X wrote with Alex Haley.	■ Language arts: Biography
Hinds, Gareth	<i>Beowulf</i>	Based on A.J. Church's translation, this is a beautiful rendition of the classic tale of Beowulf and Grendel.	■ Language arts: Classics; epic poetry/legends
Lyga, Barry	<i>The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl</i>	Fanboy is the object of bullying from his peers, and his only friend can't be seen with him. Then he gets a mysterious IM from Goth Girl, which begins an unlikely friendship.	■ Language arts: Characterization, cause/effect, humor
O'Connor, George	<i>Journey Into Mohawk Country: The Journal of Harmen Meyndertsz van den Bogaert</i>	This story of a young Dutch trader who travels through the land of the Iroquois is translated from Dutch primary sources.	■ Language arts: Research and using primary sources
Shivack, Nadia	<i>Inside Out: Portrait of an Eating Disorder</i>	Shivack describes both literally and figuratively the chaos of her life when she suffered from bulimia.	■ Language arts: Symbolism, nonfiction ■ Health: Bulimia

and some may be considering possible action research working with students in their classrooms.

Researchers have become aware of the multiple opportunities to study the processes involved in this multimodal format and how format can affect comprehension, but many questions remain. Just as Bob Dylan (1964) pointedly declared during the 1960s, "the times they are a-changin'," and everyone involved in literacy needs to embrace and understand these changes to more fully appreciate and participate in emerging literacy events and formats.

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